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The CIA's Real Sins

For all its "destabilization" efforts, "disinformation" programs and cloak-and-dagger activities, the CIA's real function is supposed to be expert, objective analysis of world events.

Yet not a single piece of pending legislation intended to "unleash" the CIA would have any significant effect on the agency's ability to perform its prime function.

By demanding punishment for anyone who names its agents, seeking authority to spy on Americans and claiming exemption from the Freedom of Information Act, the CIA is deliberately throwing up a smokescreen to hide its failures at intelligence-gathering.

A point to keep in mind is that a decade ago, the CIA was doing most of what it is asking Congress for authority to do now. But the illegal James Bond operations did not improve the quality of the CIA's intelligence.

That's what should be the subject of the debate on Capitol Hill—the quality of the CIA's intelligence, not the side issues and irrelevancies that are getting all the attention.

A devastating assessment of the CIA's performance has been under review by White House aides. The top-secret analysis has been examined by my associate Dale Van Atta.

Mind you, the appraisal was not the work of the CIA's usual liberal critics. It was prepared by professionals for the most conservative administration in half a century.

Here is its truly appalling conclusion:

"The American intelligence community, chiefly the CIA, has routinely failed to predict major political and military developments before such developments become irreversible and before they become blatantly obvious, even to the general public."

What the report called "massive and virtually inexplicable intelligence failures that have occurred during the last 15 years" include the following:

- "Abject failure to predict the massive Soviet buildup" of nuclear missiles;
- "Wholesale failure to understand the characteristics of Soviet missiles under development prior to SALT I;
- "Failure to predict the major improvements in accuracy of Soviet ICBMs in the late 1970s;

- "Consistent gross misstatement of Soviet global objectives;

- "General failure to explain the characteristics of Soviet conventional weapons systems and vessels, for example, the Soviet T-64 and T-72 tanks and the new Russian guided missile cruisers;

- "Consistent miscalculation regarding the effect of and general apology for massive technology transfer from the West to the East;

- "Apparent internal failure of counterintelligence generally," and, of course,

- The entire situation in Iran.

This indictment would be merely embarrassing if it were only a matter of professional performance that had no bearing on national security. But the top-secret analysis estimates that, of the fast-approaching 10-year period when "The U.S. ICBM force will be totally vulnerable to a Soviet missile attack, at least five years can be attributed to miscalculation engendered by erroneous intelligence produced by the CIA."

Having listed the symptoms, the analysts proceed to diagnose the cause of our intelligence system's sickness:

There is "nothing that remotely resembles competitive analysis, nor is there any process for quality review," the report explains, adding: "These deficiencies exist notwithstanding general recognition by all governments that competitive analysis is essential to accuracy and that quality review is the best method of weeding out those incapable of or deliberately prone toward drawing incorrect assessments."

In fact, the analysis says, there "appears to be almost a direct relationship between degree of failure to predict accurately military and political developments—and career success." In other words, it's the bumbler who gets promoted.

There is no real review of intelligence estimates several years later, when their accuracy or inaccuracy would be obvious, and the analysts explain why: "Doing so would embarrass the CIA and would show a pattern of career advancement by those who gave the worst assessments."

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